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LABOR ORGANIZATION AND LABOR POLITICS, 1827-37.

ENGLAND is considered the home of trade-unionism, but the distinction belongs to Philadelphia. Modern trade-unionism as an industrial and political force began with the coming together of previously existing societies from the several trades to form a central body on the representative principle. Working by themselves, these isolated societies could accomplish but little in the face of hostile governments and employers. Consequently, they inclined to secrecy or to cloak their movements under the garb of friendly benefits. But when they formed a representative body, they came out in the open, they encouraged each other in the spirit of aggressiveness, they greatly increased their membership, they organized the workmen in trades previously unorganized. This was the real beginning, not only of trade-unions, but even of the term "trades' union." For the term indicated originally not a union in a trade, but a union of trade "societies." The latter was the usual name of the isolated organizations. The general public, however, which first came to know them and to take alarm when these societies joined themselves in a union of trades, transferred the name of the representative body to the primary body. So that at the present time what was originally a trades' union has sought other names, such as Central Labor Union, Trades Council, Trades Assembly, or Federation of Labor.

The first trades' union in England was that of Manchester, organized in 1829, altho there seems to have been an attempt to organize one in 1824. But the first one in America was the "Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations," organized in Philadelphia in 1827, two years earlier. The name came from Manchester, but the thing from Philadelphia. Neither union lasted long. The

Manchester union lived two years, and the Philadelphia union one year. But the Manchester union died, and the Philadelphia union metamorphosed into politics. Here, again, Philadelphia was the pioneer, for it called into being the first labor party. Not only this, but thru the Mechanics' Union Philadelphia started probably the first wage-earners' paper ever published,—the *Mechanics' Free Press*,—antedating, in January, 1828, the first similar journal in England by two years. A three years' file of the paper is preserved in perfect condition by the Pennsylvania Historical Society. The political movement, begun in Philadelphia, was taken up by New York, Albany, and Troy in 1829, by Boston in 1830, and by other places in the same years. It disappeared altogether in 1831, after the older political parties had borrowed its planks and captured its leaders.

But the trades' union was again inaugurated two years later, in 1833, this time with a resolution learned from experience to "keep out of politics." New York now took the lead, and organized the "General Trades' Union," bringing the name from England. Baltimore and Philadelphia quickly followed, and in the next four years there were trades' unions in a dozen cities from Boston to Washington, and even as far west as Louisville. In New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia these trades' unions were remarkably aggressive and successful, and certainly in Philadelphia in 1835 and 1836 there was a larger proportion of the population enrolled as members of labor organizations than there has been at any time in the seventy years that have followed.

In 1834 these local unions formed a national association, which they called "The National Trades' Union," with a constitution and officers. Altho England also had its so-called national organization in 1834 under the stimulus of Robert Owen, this fell to pieces in six months, while the National Trades' Union in the United States held three conventions with increasing influence in 1834, 1835, and 1836. The national union in England covered a few coun-

ties: the one in America stretched from Boston to Cincinnati. The American movement was not imported from England: it was an indigenous product of American conditions, and its leaders were American-born. Altho the daily papers of this time in America abound with news of strikes and with editorials of advice to restless mechanics, yet the remarkable national labor organization that backed these strikes was barely mentioned, and has been as utterly forgotten as the lost tribes of Israel or the continent of Atlantis.

The authentic sources from which to learn of these associations are the labor papers; and it is fortunate that these have been preserved in unexpected abundance in a few libraries. Out of some forty titles the principal ones have been located thru the search set up by the American Bureau of Industrial Research. Aside from the *Mechanics' Free Press*, already mentioned, the most valued is a daily paper,—*The Man*,—published for sixteen months in 1834 and 1835 under the influence of the trades' union of New York. It was found, after six days' excavation by two men in overalls, in the storeroom of the New York Historical Society. Another discovery is the file of the *Working Man's Advocate* of 1829–30, the first of the New York labor papers, preserved these seventy-five years by the Workingmen's Institute of New Harmony, Indiana. The Library of Congress has the *National Laborer*, the organ in 1836 of the Philadelphia union and the National Trades' Union. Other libraries, including the Oneida Historical Society, the Delaware Historical Society, the Lynn Public, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the New York Public, have scattering numbers, which, when pieced together, give often a fairly complete file. These papers contain constitutions and by-laws, official proceedings of the local trades-unions, and detailed reports of the national conventions more complete even than those which the Knights of Labor or the American Federation of Labor have published of their proceedings. It is intended to prepare a union finding list of these papers for the use of librarians and students, and more especially

to reprint, both from labor papers and employers' organs, such material as has documentary value. In this way it is hoped that these forgotten forerunners of American labor organization and labor politics will stand forth as they actually were in the storm and stress of that significant period in our history.

The labor movement of this period has usually been treated as a communistic or agrarian agitation, but this is because our knowledge of it comes only from the papers hostile to it or from Robert Dale Owen's *Free Enquirer*. Robert Owen had founded New Harmony in 1825 with an amount of advertising never before or since secured for a radical program. When his followers scattered after 1827, they attached themselves to whatever elements dissatisfied with political and industrial conditions would give them a hearing. As soon, however, as the import of their teachings was understood, the mechanics and workingmen withdrew support, and limited their movement to the immediate demands of legislation or of trade-unions.

The Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia sprang from an unsuccessful strike of the carpenters for a ten-hour day. There the labor party held the balance of power in two elections, and all of its candidates who were indorsed by the Adams and Jackson parties were elected. Even the Congressional candidates of the older parties flung out their banners as the "true working men's party," and appropriated the slogan of "6 to 6," which the workingmen had used to indicate their demand for the ten-hour day. The labor party disappeared entirely in 1830, and the American politician had learned for the first time how to split the labor vote.

In New York the movement of 1829 was much more complicated than it was in Philadelphia, more radical in its demands, more distinct in its cleavages of classes, and attended with greater immediate success. It began with a meeting called to protest against increased hours of labor. The meeting adopted an agrarian preamble drawn up by a mechanic, Thomas Skidmore, and transporting into eco-

nomics the Declaration of Independence. They resolved that "the Creator has made all equal," and that "in the first formation of government no man gives up to others his original right of soil and becomes a smith, a weaver, a builder, or other mechanic or laborer, without receiving a guaranty that reasonable toil shall enable him to live as comfortable as others." They contemplated a strike, and not a political party. Six months later they nominated a ticket selected by lot, and adopted another agrarian platform, again drawn up by Skidmore, and accidentally elected a carpenter to the legislature. Three months later they ousted Skidmore, and took up Robert Dale Owen. He persuaded them to renounce agrarianism and to indorse free education, but his free schools were to take the children away from their parents, to dress, feed, shelter, and teach them alike. He would substitute for Skidmore's communism of property a Pestalozzian communism of education. On this the party split. Tammany finished the disruption by enacting the mechanics' lien law,—the first law of its kind to protect the journeyman as well as the contractor. Four workingmen's tickets then came into the field. The biggest vote went to Tammany and the smallest to Skidmore. Thus Tammany won its first success as the "workingman's friend," and socialists had their prototype in the agrarians.

Outside Philadelphia and New York the workingmen's party included small employers. In Boston its platform appealed to "laboring men, mechanics, tradesmen, farmers, and others standing upon the same level." So in Charleston, Wilmington, and elsewhere. The class division of employer and employee was as yet limited to a few localities. Labor politics was a part of the general protest of the times raised by the "productive classes" against "aristocracy."

Four years of inaction followed the disruption. The stage was filled by Jackson and the Bank. When the Bank disappeared, its place was taken by a host of State banks with a flood of paper money. In 1835 and 1836 prices and the cost of living rose 50 to 100 per cent.

Wages did not rise in the same proportion. The inflation came so suddenly that wage-earners could not escape to the free lands of the frontier. They were caught in a trap. They turned to their newly found trades' unions and to their National Trades' Union, which had held its first convention in 1834. They attributed to these organizations a permanence and grandeur pathetic in view of the collapse three years later, but excusable in view of the victories meanwhile. Not until thirty years afterwards, in a similar inflation of the Civil War, did organized labor appear again in similar vigor. The Trades' Union of 1833 was a generation ahead of the industrial conditions that give organized labor endurance. It was not an industrial revolution, as in England, but a financial inflation, that provoked the labor movement of 1835.

The many strikes of 1835-36 are well known. The fact that they were systematically supported by extensive organizations of labor is not so well known. The climax was reached in 1836. Prices continued to rise, and the societies continued to strike. Their successes were inspiring. The trades' unions supported them with enthusiasm and devotion. Dues were increased and donations added to dues. Finally, the ominous sign of over-organization appeared. Jurisdictional struggles began. Blacksmiths protested against horse-shoers, and hand-loom weavers against factory weavers. These were not settled when the panic of 1837 stopped everything, and the trades' unions disappeared when the wage-earners' employment ceased.

The issues that aroused the wage-earners may be learned from the debates in their conventions. The first national convention discussed politics. The controversy raged back and forth exactly as it does to-day; but, finally, the convention excluded the word "political" from its objects and substituted the word "intellectual." In each convention they discussed education, public lands, immigration, child labor, female labor, prison labor, lotteries, banking, and co-operation.

The results of the labor movement of 1827 to 1837 can

only be suggested. Here were the beginnings not only of the general organization of labor, but also of humanitarian and reform movements. The industrial revolution was under way, but its substantial basis—the railway—was not yet a factor. In general, the period was that of the sudden and rough awakening of labor as a distinct element in American history. For the first time magazines and newspapers gave space to labor problems. Humanitarians began to examine the conditions of working and living. Politicians put labor planks in their platforms. Protectionism framed its pauper labor argument, and manufacturers proceeded to capitalize the labor movement. Some demands were immediately granted, others remotely. Imprisonment for debt disappeared before 1835. Free schools became general before 1850. Mechanics' liens have spread from New York to all other States. The ten-hour day became the standard. Juries began to return verdicts of "not guilty" in labor conspiracies. The importance of free land as an outlet for labor was first realized, and leaders of the homestead agitation learned their lesson in the predicament of the trades' unions of 1835. Although temporary and forgotten, the labor uprising of the thirties had permanent results.

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